Spanish Stories

**Un oso y un amor ( A bear and a love) by Sabine Ulibarri**  
The Mountains  
  
It was the end of June. The birth of the sheep in the spring and the shearing was over. The flock was climbing the mountain. Abran pointed and directed the flock. Me, in front with 6 donkeys carrying goods. From here on life would be slow and peaceful.   
I found an adequate place. I unloaded the donkeys. I set the tent. I cut branches for the beds. I started fixing   
something to eat for when Abran arrives. Already the first sheep were arriving. Every once in a while, I would go out to stop them and move them around so they would get familiar with the camp site. The grass was tall and lush. The aspen trees were tall and white. Their leaves were moving like singing to a song of life and joy. The smells and the flowers were good. The icy, crystal clear water of the stream. Everything was   
peace and harmony. That is why the gods live in the mountains. The mountains are an eternal feast.   
The little pots were boiling. The sheep were pacing or sleeping. I was contemplating the beauty and the grandeur of nature.   
  
The banquet  
  
All of a sudden, I heard familiar voices and laughter. I gave a shout. It was my friends from Tierra Amarilla. Abelito Sanchez accompanied with Clorinda Chavez, and Shirley Cantel. The four of us were in the 3 year of secondary   
school. We were 15 years old.   
We unsaddled and we staked out our horses. And we started to enjoy the moment. There was so much to say. Questions. Jokes. So much laughter to renew. Now that I remember it, I shudder. How beautiful that was. We were young. We knew how to love and sing. Without liquor, without drugs and without vulgarity.   
When Abran arrived, we ate. I had a tasty and good smelling roast side of lamb cooked over coals. They brought delicacies that you're not used to eating in the mountains. The joy and the good food and the friendship converted this place into a banquet to be remembered forever.   
  
Shirley  
  
Shirley Cantel and I grew up together. Since we were children, we went to school together. I used to carry her books. Later we used to bring in the cows every afternoon. We used to play in the stables or in the haystacks. We used to   
have horse races. In the school plays, she and I played important roles. We always competed to see who would get the best grades. We never thought we'd be in love. Last year, for the first time, we discovered it, I don't know how. Now this relationship would be serious. Today I see it as a glorious illusion.   
Shirley had a white dove that attracted a lot of attention. She always used to take it out when she rode on the horse. The dove used to sit on her shoulder, or it would be perched on the mane, or on the rump of the horse. The dove   
got to know me and love me also. Sometimes the dove used to go with me too. It used to fly away and come back. The dove was another sentimental bridge between the two of us. Today it recognized me. Immediately , it perched on my shoulder. It sensual cooing in my ear was a message from its owner.   
Shirley was a north American, but she spoke Spanish just like me. This was the usual in Tierra Amarilla. Almost all the north Americans then spoke Spanish. We were one single society, we got along well.   
  
The Bear  
  
Jokes and tricks. Laughter and more laughter. Fleeting flirtations. Loaded questions. Unexpected answers. The party in its height.   
All of a sudden, the herd got scared. It whipped from one side to another. It came towards us like a wave. Bleats of terror. Something had frightened the herd.   
I grabbed the rifle. I tell Shirley "Come with me. Lets go hand in hand". Coming around a bush, we found ourselves with a bear. He has killed a sheep. He has ripped open the entrails. The bear has the snout bleeding. We were very close.   
Normally, the bear runs away when it encounters a human. But there are exceptions: when there are cubs, when he is wounded, or when he has tasted blood. At the moment he becomes very fierce. Even a dog becomes fierce when he's eating.   
This was a young bear. It probably was 2 or 3 years old. These are the most daring and dangerous. We interrupted its dinner. He became furious and he came at us.   
The others came at us. They were contemplating the drama. The bear was coming closer to us very slowly. He stopped, shook his head and growled. We backed up little by little, until we bumped against a fallen tree. There was no choice. We had to confront the animal.   
Nobody did anything to help me. Nobody said anything. The girls were silent. Nobody was hysterical. Perhaps if I was by myself, I would've been scared to death. But there was my girlfriend on my side. Her life depended on me. The   
others were looking on. I never felt so sure of my self. I never felt like such a man, never so manly. I felt primitive defending my woman. Her and the others had confidence in me.   
I raised the rifle, I aimed, I fired. The shot went into the open mouth and came out from the nape of the neck. The shot echoed on the mountains. The bear fell dead at our feet. Shirley gave me hug. I wanted to die of happiness.   
I skinned the animal myself. I felt its warm blood on my hands and on my arms. I felt like a conqueror.   
In another occasion, I gave Shirley a ring as a gift that my mother had given to me. In another occasion, a box of candies. This occasion, I gave her the skin of the bear that she knew in a very scary moment. When she left, the took with her the skin, tied tightly in the straps of the saddle   
  
Memories  
  
The years went by. I went to one university and she to another. That separated us. Then came the war. That separated us even more. When a river divides in two, there is no way that the two rivers can come together again.   
I haven't seen her since those days. Every once in a while someone tells me something about her. I know she got married and that she has a family, and that she lives very far away. I remember with lots of love from time to time of   
that wonderful youth that I shared with her.   
Recently and old friend of mine told me that he saw her, there where she lives, and he met her family. He told me that on the floor, in front of the fireplace, there is a bearskin rug. She remembers also.

**Cajas de cartón   
  
Francisco Jiménez**  
  
It was that time of year again. Ito, the strawberry share-cropper, did not smile. It was natural. The peak of the strawberry season was over, and the last few days the workers, most of them braceros (laborers), were not picking as many boxes as they had during the months of June and July.  
  
As the last days of August disappeared, so did the number of braceros. Sunday, only one—the best picker—came to work. I liked him. Sometimes we talked during our half-hour lunch break. That is how I found out he was from Jalisco, the same state in Mexico my family was from. That Sunday was the last time I saw him.   
  
When the sun had tired and sunk behind the mountains, Ito signaled us that it was time to go home. “Ya esora,” (It's time") he yelled in his broken Spanish. Those were the words I waited for twelve hours a day, every day, seven days a week, week after week. And the thought of not hearing them again saddened me.   
  
As we drove home, Papá did not say a word. With both hands on the wheel, he stared at the dirt road. My older brother, Roberto, was also silent. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Once in a while he cleared from his throat the dust that blew in from outside.   
Yes, it was that time of year. When I opened the front door to the shack, I stopped. Everything we owned was neatly packed in cardboard boxes. Suddenly I felt even more the weight of hours, days, weeks, and months of work. I sat down on a box. The thought of having to move to Fresno and knowing what was in store for me there brought tears to my eyes.   
  
That night I could not sleep. I lay in bed thinking about how much I hated this move.  
A little before five o’clock in the morning, Papá woke everyone up. A few minutes later, the yelling and screaming of my little brothers and sisters, for whom the move was a great adventure, broke the silence of dawn. Shortly, the barking of the dogs accompanied them.   
  
While we packed the breakfast dishes, Papá went outside to start the “Carcanchita.” That was the name Papá gave his old ’38 black Ply-mouth. He bought it in a used-car lot in Santa Rosa in the winter of 1949. Papá was very proud of his little jalopy. He had a right to be proud of it. He spent a lot of time looking at other cars before buying this one. When he finally chose the Carcanchita, he checked it thoroughly before driving it out of the car lot. He examined every inch of the car. He listened to the motor, tilting his head from side to side like a parrot, trying to detect any noises that spelled car trouble. After being satisfied with the looks and sounds of the car, Papá then insisted on knowing who the original owner was. He never did find out from the car salesman, but he bought the car anyway. Papá figured the original owner must have been an important man, because behind the rear seat of the car he found a blue necktie.   
  
Papá parked the car out in front and left the motor running. “Listo,” ("Ready") he yelled. Without saying a word, Roberto and I began to carry the boxes out to the car. Roberto carried the two big boxes and I carried the two smaller ones. Papá then threw the mattress on top of the car roof and tied it with ropes to the front and rear bumpers.   
  
Everything was packed except Mamá’s pot. It was an old, large galvanized pot she had picked up at an army surplus store in Santa María the year I was born. The pot had many dents and nicks, and the more dents and nicks it acquired the more Mamá liked it. “Mi olla,” ("My pot") she used to say proudly.   
I held the front door open as Mamá carefully carried out her pot by both handles, making sure not to spill the cooked beans. When she got to the car, Papá reached out to help her with it. Roberto opened the rear car door and Papá gently placed it on the floor behind the front seat. All of us then climbed in. Papá sighed, wiped the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve, and said wearily: “Es todo.” ("That's all")   
As we drove away, I felt a lump in my throat. I turned around and looked at our little shack for the last time.   
At sunset we drove into a labor camp near Fresno. Since Papá did not speak English, Mamá asked the camp foreman if he needed any more workers. “We don’t need no more,” said the foreman, scratching his head. “Check with Sullivan down the road. Can’t miss him. He lives in a big white house with a fence around it.”   
When we got there, Mamá walked up to the house. She went through a white gate, past a row of rosebushes, up the stairs to the front door. She rang the doorbell. The porch light went on and a tall, husky man came out. They exchanged a few words. After the man went in, Mamá clasped her hands and hurried back to the car. “We have work! Mr. Sullivan said we can stay there the whole season,” she said, gasping and pointing to an old garage near the stables.   
  
The garage was worn out by the years. It had no windows. The walls, eaten by termites, strained to support the roof, full of holes. The dirt floor, populated by earthworms, looked like a gray road map.   
That night, by the light of a kerosene lamp, we unpacked and cleaned our new home. Roberto swept away the loose dirt, leaving the hard ground. Papá plugged the holes in the walls with old newspapers and tin can tops. Mamá fed my little brothers and sisters. Papá and Roberto then brought in the mattress and placed it on the far corner of the garage. “Mamá, you and the little ones sleep on the mattress. Roberto, Panchito, and I will sleep outside under the trees,” Papá said.   
Early next morning Mr. Sullivan showed us where his crop was, and after breakfast, Papá, Roberto, and I headed for the vineyard to pick.   
Around nine o’clock the temperature had risen to almost one hundred degrees. I was completely soaked in sweat and my mouth felt as if I had been chewing on a handkerchief. I walked over to the end of the row, picked up the jug of water we had brought, and began drinking. “Don’t drink too much; you’ll get sick,” Roberto shouted. No sooner had he said that than I felt sick to my stomach. I dropped to my knees and let the jug roll off my hands. I remained motionless with my eyes glued on the hot sandy ground. All I could hear was the drone of insects. Slowly I began to recover. I poured water over my face and neck and watched the dirty water run down my arms to the ground.   
  
I still felt a little dizzy when we took a break to eat lunch. It was past two o’clock, and we sat underneath a large walnut tree that was on the side of the road. While we ate, Papá jotted down the number of boxes we had picked. Roberto drew designs on the ground with a stick. Suddenly I noticed Papá’s face turn pale as he looked down the road. “Here comes the school bus,” he whispered loudly in alarm. Instinctively, Roberto and I ran and hid in the vineyards. We did not want to get in trouble for not going to school. The neatly dressed boys about my age got off. They carried books under their arms. After they crossed the street, the bus drove away. Roberto and I came out from hiding and joined Papá. “Tienen que tener cuidado,” ("You have to be careful") he warned us.  
After lunch we went back to work. The sun kept beating down. The buzzing insects, the wet sweat, and the hot, dry dust made the afternoon seem to last forever. Finally the mountains around the valley reached out and swallowed the sun. Within an hour it was too dark to continue picking. The vines blanketed the grapes, making it difficult to see the bunches. “Vámonos,” said Papá, signaling to us that it was time to quit work. Papá then took out a pencil and began to figure out how much we had earned our first day. He wrote down numbers, crossed some out, wrote down some more. “Quince,” (fifteen) he murmured.   
  
When we arrived home, we took a cold shower underneath a water hose. We then sat down to eat dinner around some wooden crates that served as a table. Mamá had cooked a special meal for us. We had rice and tortillas with carne con chile, my favorite dish.   
The next morning I could hardly move. My body ached all over. I felt little control over my arms and legs. This feeling went on every morning for days until my muscles finally got used to the work.   
  
It was Monday, the first week of November. The grape season was over and I could now go to school. I woke up early that morning and lay in bed, looking at the stars and savoring the thought of not going to work and of starting sixth grade for the first time that year. Since I could not sleep, I decided to get up and join Papá and Roberto at breakfast. I sat at the table across from Roberto, but I kept my head down. I did not want to look up and face him. I knew he was sad. He was not going to school today. He was not going tomorrow, or next week, or next month. He would not go until the cotton season was over, and that was sometime in February. I rubbed my hands together and watched the dry, acid-stained skin fall to the floor in little rolls.   
When Papá and Roberto left for work, I felt relief. I walked to the top of a small grade next to the shack and watched the Carcanchita disappear in the distance in a cloud of dust.   
  
Two hours later, around eight o’clock, I stood by the side of the road waiting for school bus number twenty. When it arrived, I climbed in. Everyone was busy either talking or yelling. I sat in an empty seat in the back.   
When the bus stopped in front of the school, I felt very nervous. I looked out the bus window and saw boys and girls carrying books under their arms. I put my hands in my pant pockets and walked to the principal’s office. When I entered, I heard a woman’s voice say: “May I help you?” I was startled. I had not heard English for months. For a few seconds I remained speechless. I looked at the lady, who waited for an answer. My first instinct was to answer her in Spanish, but I held back. Finally, after struggling for English words, I managed to tell her that I wanted to enroll in the sixth grade. After answering many questions, I was led to the classroom.   
  
Mr. Lema, the sixth-grade teacher, greeted me and assigned me a desk. He then introduced me to the class. I was so nervous and scared at that moment when everyone’s eyes were on me that I wished I were with Papá and Roberto picking cotton. After taking roll, Mr. Lema gave the class the assignment for the first hour. “The first thing we have to do this morning is finish reading the story we began yesterday,” he said enthusiastically. He walked up to me, handed me an English book, and asked me to read. “We are on page 125,” he said politely. When I heard this, I felt my blood rush to my head; I felt dizzy. “Would you like to read?” he asked hesitantly. I opened the book to page 125. My mouth was dry. My eyes began to water. I could not begin. “You can read later,” Mr. Lema said understandingly.   
For the rest of the reading period I kept getting angrier and angrier with myself. I should have read, I thought to myself.   
During recess I went into the restroom and opened my English book to page 125. I began to read in a low voice, pretending I was in class. There were many words I did not know. I closed the book and headed back to the classroom.   
Mr. Lema was sitting at his desk correcting papers. When I entered he looked up at me and smiled. I felt better. I walked up to him and asked if he could help me with the new words. “Gladly,” he said.   
  
The rest of the month I spent my lunch hours working on English with Mr. Lema, my best friend at school.   
  
One Friday, during lunch hour, Mr. Lema asked me to take a walk with him to the music room. “Do you like music?” he asked me as we entered the building.   
  
“Yes, I like corridos,” I answered. He then picked up a trumpet, blew on it, and handed it to me. The sound gave me goose bumps. I knew that sound. I had heard it in many corridos. “How would you like to learn how to play it?” he asked. He must have read my face because before I could answer, he added: “I’ll teach you how to play it during our lunch hours.”   
  
That day I could hardly wait to get home to tell Papá and Mamá the great news. As I got off the bus, my little brothers and sisters ran up to meet me. They were yelling and screaming. I thought they were happy to see me, but when I opened the door to our shack, I saw that everything we owned was neatly packed in cardboard boxes.